

Chairman Tom Davis
Committee on Government Reform
Hearing, "Making the Grade?"
Examining District of Columbia Public Schools Reform Proposals"
April 28, 2006
Opening Statement

The District of Columbia Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority was put in place by Congress in April 1995 to turn around the city during a financial crisis. The Control Board conducted an extensive review of DCPS and concluded the system was in disarray:

"The deplorable record of the District's public schools by every important educational and management measure has left one of the city's most important public responsibilities in a state of crisis, creating an emergency which can no longer be ignored or excused," the Control Board said. "DCPS is failing in its mission to educate the children of the District of Columbia. In virtually every area, and for every grade level, the system has failed to provide our children with a quality education and safe environment in which to learn."

Today, at a time when so many things are going right in the nation's Capital, DCPS continues to be plagued by management problems, declining enrollment, crumbling facilities, escalating violence, and substandard academic achievement. The fact is, the District's improved health cannot be sustained without a better public school system.

Families are left with unenviable or unattainable choices: Move out. Try to switch to charter schools with mixed records themselves. Win the lottery for a scholarship to a private school through the D.C. School Choice program. Or succumb to the fact that their children are going to have to succeed in spite of, rather than due to, the educational climate.

It's not impossible to succeed in D.C. public schools, but the journey is difficult. One of our witnesses today, Cedric Jennings, is here to talk about those obstacles and how he was able to overcome them.

The number of D.C. schools identified as "in need of improvement" increased from 15 in 2003 to 71 in 2004 and 80 in 2005. According to "The Nation's Report Card," a report released in 2005 by the National Center for Education Statistics, only 10 percent of 4th graders and 7 percent of 8th graders are proficient in mathematics, and only 11 percent of 4th graders and 12 percent of 8th graders are proficient in reading. DCPS is currently at the lowest levels of state educational agency performance as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Superintendents have come and gone with different ideas about how to reform the system. Past experience demonstrates that change cannot happen in a relatively short period of time and progress will not be easy. No plan can succeed without perseverance and stable

leadership. Superintendent Clifford Janey gives D.C. a chance at stability. Dr. Janey has the burden to fix many problems that predate his arrival.

Almost a year ago, Superintendent Janey testified before this Committee and discussed a new strategic plan called the “Declaration of Education: Keeping our Promise to the District’s Children.” The initiative is aimed at raising academic achievement in every classroom, in every school. There are three goals that guide the Declaration: academics, management systems, and communication. Included in the plan is a framework to raise student achievement by retaining and training high-quality teachers and principals, engaging parents and communities, improving business operations and school facilities, and implementing new curriculum standards. We’re interested to hear today how those plans are working.

But we hold this hearing against the backdrop of the decision by the U.S. Department of Education to declare D.C. schools a “high risk” grantee – once again highlighting the weak managerial and financial controls in the system. The “high risk” designation means that special conditions will be imposed on all existing grants issued by the Department to DCPS. And if corrective action is not taken, the loss of federal dollars is a real possibility.

I am interested to hear more about how this designation came about, and how this move can perhaps benefit D.C. students in the long run by forcing changes in the public school system, and by bringing more widespread community resources to it. We also need to know what exactly is at stake and what is expected of DCPS.

According to the Department, DCPS failed to meet accountability timelines and repeatedly submitted reports late. The Department also faulted DCPS’ inability to monitor federally funded programs and services and highlighted systemic internal control weaknesses.

In addition, the District has to do a better job incorporating the provisions of No Child Left Behind into planning and implementation for system-wide change. Failure to make progress, as defined by the law, carries specific and serious consequences. If the Department determines that DCPS has not made substantial progress or met special conditions, then the Department can consider discontinuing all or part of one or more grants awarded to DCPS, or take other remedial action. This hearing gives us the opportunity to examine the current situation and discuss the resources needed to meet the standards set by federal law.

I also hope to re-examine how the District exercises state and local functions in the educational realm. No Child Left Behind requires State Education Agencies to exert authority over local school districts. Accountability, school improvement, teacher quality, and increased reporting requirements are four core features. These are four areas D.C. needs to significantly improve.

The District must navigate a complex relationship between state and local education functions. DCPS is both the state and local education agency and therefore monitors its own federal compliance. Previously DCPS was the only local school district in the District of Columbia. However there are now charter schools that serve a significant population of students. Under this arrangement, the DCPS Superintendent also serves as the chief state education officer responsible for carrying out state-level functions, including oversight of DCPS operations – a responsibility that in almost every other jurisdiction would be carried out by a separate state

education agency. While public charter schools are not under the auspices of DCPS and are each considered an independent local education agency for state-level purposes, the school system performs state-level functions on their behalf.

Faced with pressure to have state-level functions performed by an entity other than DCPS, the District created the Office of the State Education, allowing DCPS to concentrate its resources on improving teaching and learning. Currently, the SEO exercises limited state functions: auditing annual enrollment, issuing rules for annual verification of D.C. residency, studying and making recommendation on the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula and state agency functions for Department of Agriculture grants.

I'm eager to learn more about how reform efforts are proceeding and how students, teachers, administrators, parents, and elected officials can support the plan. As policy makers, educators, and citizens we have to determine our priorities and marshal the right resources.

I know we're all here hoping to give all D.C. students a chance at a brighter future.